



The Stamps Building

Stamps Building
Foundation, Inc.

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V.O. Stamps

“The Father of Southern Gospel Music”



BORN: September 18, 1892,
Upshur County, Texas.

DIED: August 19, 1940 Baylor Hospital,
Dallas, Texas.

BURIED: Laurell Land Cemetery, Dal-
las, Texas.

Inducted 1997 Gospel Music Hall of Fame

V.O. Stamps' father, W. O. Stamps, was a lumberman and sometime state legislator. As a young teenager, Virgil attended the Upshur County Singing Convention and fell in love with quartet singing. In 1907, he attended a singing school run by R. M. Morgan. From 1911 to 1914, he taught singing schools, while continuing to work at the family store in Ore City, Texas. In 1914, he composed his first song—"Man Behind the Plow"—and sold it for ten cents a copy. Encouraged by his success, he went to work for a music company that year, and continued his musical studies.

In 1917, Stamps moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to work for another music company, and in 1918, to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. He returned to Texas in 1919, settling in Timpson, then in Jacksonville, where he opened a branch office for his employer. In 1924, he founded the V. O. Stamps Music Company, and published his first volume, Harbor Bells. In 1926, J. R. Baxter, Jr., became associated with the Stamps concern; in 1927, the company changed its name to the Stamps-Baxter Music Company. Within two years, the firm moved its headquarters to Dallas, Texas, and opened an office in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

For the first few years, Stamps-Baxter had its books printed in Dalton, Georgia, but in 1934 decided to begin printing them itself. By 1936, the company moved to larger quarters on Tyler Street, and was known as the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company. At the time, it was

said to be largest printing concern in the world devoted to Gospel music.

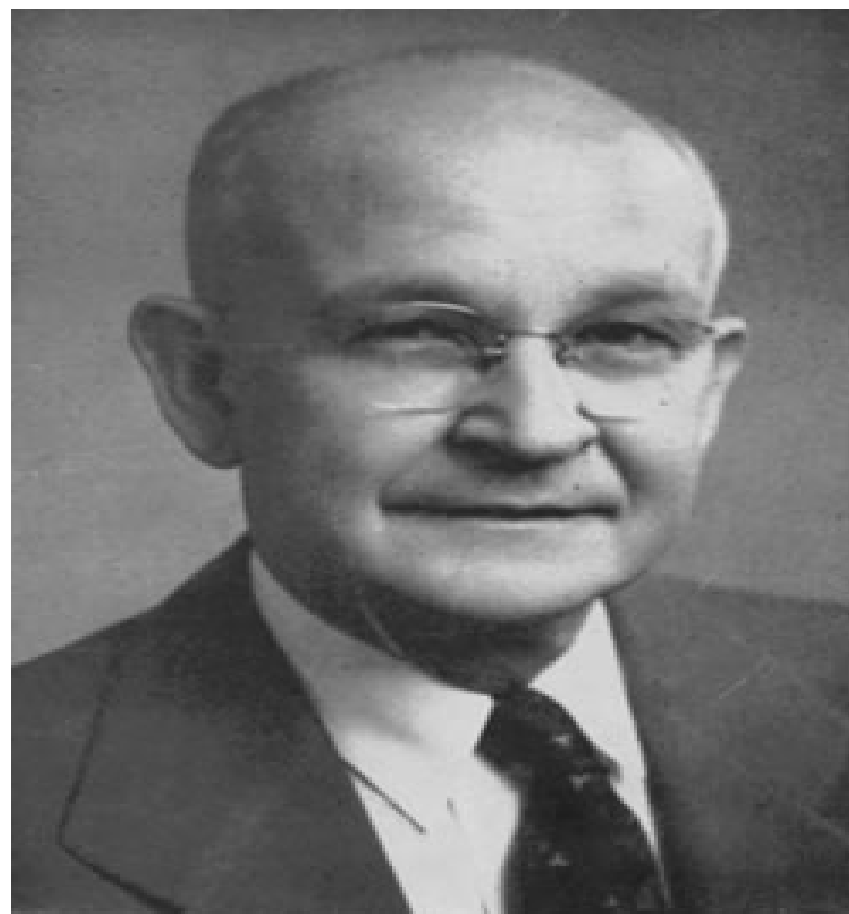
Stamps was also known as the founder of the Stamps Quartet, a Gospel singing group, which in 1936 began broadcasting in Dallas, Texas, on radio station KRLD. In 1938 and 1939, the quartet ran all-night singing conventions in in locations such as the Cotton Bowl of the State Fair Park, and the Dallas Sportatorium. The 1939 event ran from 8:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m., and was broadcast for nearly eight straight hours.

At the time of his death, Stamps was supervising over a dozen quartets singing on various radio stations, was editing the monthly Gospel Music News, and was president of the Texas State Singers Association. He eventually became a member of the Texas Music Hall of Fame, and—in at least the secular world—is perhaps remembered for his arrangement of the music to *“When the Saints Go Marching In,”*

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J.R. Baxter

“Gospel Music Pioneer”



Jesse Randall "J.R." Baxter (1887 - 1960)
Inducted 1997 Gospel Music Hall of Fame

J. R. "Pap" Baxter was a pioneering figure in the development of Southern Gospel Music. Individually and through his partnership with V.O. Stamps, his impact on commercial gospel music was immeasurable.

After an early career with the A. J. Showalter Company, he joined forces with fellow entrepreneur V. O. Stamps in 1926 and the pair created one of the most successful companies in the gospel music field—the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company.

The annual Stamps-Baxter School of Music

trained several generations of young people throughout the South in the fundamentals of composing and performing gospel music. Baxter helped to popularize gospel music throughout the country through the publication of shape-note songbooks and by sponsoring numerous quartets on the radio.

Shape-note songbooks from the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company found their way into homes and churches throughout America.

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Internationally recognized Gospel Recording Artists Bill and Gloria Gaither visits the Stamps Building in Dallas, Texas.

"This Building is very significant to Gospel Music History" - Bill Gaither

THE HANDBOOK OF TEXAS **Online**

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GOSPEL MUSIC. Convention gospel music and community gospel singing are two variations of an American heritage with direct roots in colonial New England and indirect roots reaching to the Italian Renaissance. Community gospel singing is a folk phenomenon that allows individuals to reenact the process of community through artistic expression by singing religious hymns and reaffirming bonds of social support through the informal festival of a picnic among neighbors. Gospel music was a major venue for creative folk expression in rural Southern agricultural communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The folk art form was spread by singing masters who toured rural America with evangelistic fervor teaching musical fundamentals to young audiences. Community singing and its more formal cousin, convention gospel music, also constitute the first instance of mass musical participation across geographic and cultural lines in American popular culture and presaged more modern forms of mass musical participation such as country western music and rock and roll. Texas community singers still gather on weekends in towns around the state in a nondenominational setting to sing religious hymns.

Singings consist of two genres both of which employ four part harmony. Each genre is further characterized through the use of shape note systems for musical notation. Shape notes are a method of musical notation adapted for sight singing choral arrangements. Shape notes reduce the tones of the scale to specific shapes such as circles, triangles, trapezoids, or squares. Those shapes represent relationships between the root note "do" and the subsequent notes of the melody. As an alternative form of notation to the formal method of musical education, shape notes convey the tonal relationships of sound through shape in addition to positions on lines and spaces. Shape note music enables singers to move the root note-or key-up or down to fit individual vocal ranges. The seven shape note tradition is a nineteenth century evolution from the original fasola, or four note solmization, which was imported from the British Isles and proved popular in colonial America. The four note system-or fasola-continues today as Sacred Harp music.^{9v} Sacred Harp generally uses minor scales, relies on one songbook only, and segregates singers into separate groups based on voice parts. Sacred Harp melodies have been traced back 900 years to Medieval Europe, although the lyrics were subsequently changed or updated to reflect religious themes. Sacred Harp also relies on a similar set of republished songs and exhibits remarkable continuity over time. Sacred Harp is less widespread and generally confined to the eastern parts of Texas and areas of the South.

The second genre, seven shape note hymnody, attracts greater audiences and is popular statewide. The seven shape note tradition in contrast became a dynamic vehicle for gospel songwriters in the late nineteenth century and attracted a growing body of new compositions that demonstrated greater musical sophistication than their fasola cousins. Seven shape note songbooks exhibit the musical versatility that appealed to young attendees at singing schools and was responsible, therefore, for the growing popularity of the seven shape note tradition. The first Texas community singing using the seven shape note tradition reportedly occurred in the latter part of December 1879. Itinerant teachers representing the A. J. Showalter Company of Dalton, Georgia-including company founder A. J. Showalter-ventured west to Giddings in East Texas and conducted a rural music school that lasted for several weeks. At least two individuals from that initial school learned enough over the next year to continue on as teachers of the seven shape note method in Texas and were subsequently employed by the Showalter company.

While community singings are relatively unstructured, convention gatherings display formal organization. Generally, a convention is a gathering of participants from several communities.

Conventions occur on the county, regional, and state levels. In 1936, as community gospel music approached its peak popularity, singers from several southern states gathered at the behest of songbook publishers to stage the first national gospel singing convention in Birmingham, Alabama. The national convention continues to this day, rotating among various small towns nationwide but more often staged in the South. In Texas national conventions were staged at Plainview (1968) and Stephenville (1987). A convention president operates the singing in a formal but sensitive manner. Individuals are called from the audience to lead the class or congregation. They choose the song, the piano player, and lead the singing. Convention presidents make sincere efforts to allow all who want to lead a singing the opportunity to do so during gatherings, which typically operate Saturday afternoon and evening and reconvenes on Sunday. Convention singing relies on newly-published convention books, which participants purchase to take home to their own communities. Without the support of songbook publishers, convention singing would not have achieved its widespread popularity. In early conventions—those taking place about 1900—quartets demonstrated the musical ideals of harmonic gospel singing. Within a decade songbook publishers, beginning with the Vaughn Music Company of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, asked the better groups to represent their companies. While skillfully demonstrating the art form in its ideal, quartets were good advertising for songbook publishers.

The technique of using quartets as advertising was put into widespread use by the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company in Dallas, which had a dozen quartets on the road in the 1930s. After World War II^{qv} the Stamps Quartet Music Company was represented by more than thirty-five quartets in the South. In Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, quartets aligned themselves with Texas music companies. Gospel music and the ability to sing gospel music was spread through the rural singing school tradition, which relied on itinerant music teachers. Singing schools using the seven shape note system spread rapidly in Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia after 1900; became common in East Texas during the World War I^{qv} era; and reached widespread occurrence in West Texas as the 1920s came to a close.

Local churches hosted annual community singing schools, rotating among denominations, although in West Texas the community itself put up funding for the school, which was supplied through an auction of local baked goods. A typical ten-day singing school began at 9 a.m. and lasted until 3 or 4 in the afternoon. Teachers reviewed musical rudiments. If an individual worked hard, it was possible to master the scale and to direct a song at the end of the two week session. Meanwhile, there was daily practice from the new convention books that the teacher provided. At the end of the session, the community was invited to witness the class in a recital. One sidelight of a community singing school was that churches developed choirs and the overall level of musical competence improved.

The gospel music movement peaked in the mid-twentieth century, largely through the influence of Texas-based musical publishing companies including Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company and the Stamps Quartet Music Company, both headquartered in Dallas. Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company was founded in 1924 by V. O. Stamps, who subsequently entered into partnership with J. R. Baxter, a former employee of A. J. Showalter. Baxter handled the business end of the operation out of his Chattanooga, Tennessee, office. Virgil Stamps took care of all outside affairs and was responsible for the company west of the Mississippi River. In the early 1930s Luther G. Presley opened a third office in Pangburn, Arkansas. Innovation characterized the company's operation. V. O. attracted the major songwriters to his company, lined up the best quartets, and hired the most gifted musical instructors to conduct the music schools. He approached Albert Brumley, author of *I'll Fly Away*, furnished him a car, and paid him to produce four songs annually for Stamps-Baxter songbooks. Singers worked in the Stamps printing plant during the day and sang with quartets at nights, on radio programs, or in weekend conventions. Employees also taught in the company's normal school, which offered advanced musical instruction. Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company was the largest gospel music publishing company in the world at one point. While most publishing companies produced one songbook a year, Stamps-Baxter published two convention books annually beginning in the early 1930s. Printing presses ran day and night in Dallas, and in 1940 Stamps-Baxter generated published music at

the rate of a song a day. Sales of convention books exceeded 125,000 copies each six months. Similarly, convention books published by Stamps Quartet Music Company in Dallas also exceeded 100,000 for the twice annual publications. Despite investments in modern automated printing equipment, the company achieved debt-free status in 1939.

Radio was a major factor in the spread of gospel music's popularity. One feature of the 1936 Texas Centennial^{qv} celebration in Dallas was a series of radio studios in glass booths erected in hexagonal shape at the fair grounds. Rural folk were fascinated. They had heard radio broadcasts but had never seen one. Stamps-Baxter Quartets performed several live broadcasts at the state fair and KRLD in Dallas, impressed with the reception, decided to try a noonday program in the fall of 1936. V. O. Stamps entreated listeners to write in if they like the music. Within a week KRLD was deluged with mail. The KRLD broadcasts, sponsored by American Beauty Flower, became noontime staples in Texas. Eventually, live gospel singing expanded into the morning hours at 6:45 a.m. and occupied a 10 p.m. evening slot. At noon during the summertime, it was possible to walk down any street in Texas within broadcast range of KRLD and hear the Stamps-Quartet singing. By 1938 the Stamps-Baxter singing normals in Dallas became so popular that V. O. Stamps hosted an All Night Singing at the end of the three-week class session in June. KRLD carried the first broadcast that was held in the Cotton Bowl.^{qv} At midnight FCC limitations were lifted. KRLD turned up the wattage, and the broadcast went international. Soon, V. O. Stamps and his quartets were traveling to Del Rio and providing wire recordings to radio station XERA for national broadcast.

The singing school declined in popularity after World War II as people moved to urban centers. Convention gospel music was primarily a phenomenon of rural America. In this new audience milieu, quartets discovered they no longer needed sponsorship from songbook publishers and achieved popularity on their own as entertainment acts. The Statesmen Quartet added flourishes that entertained new audiences-exuberant singing, arm waving, hand clapping, and electric performance. This was alien behavior for traditional convention quartets. But the new behavior attracted interest. The Statesmen became so popular that subsequent gospel quartets imitated their style.

Other prominent twentieth century songbook publishing enterprises include Vaughan Music Company in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, and the Tennessee Music and Printing Company in Cleveland, Tennessee. It is not uncommon to find an individual who compiles songs, adds a few original compositions, and self-publishes smaller books. Quartets like J. D. Sumner and the Blackwoods became so successful financially that they purchased the Stamps Quartet Music Company. Similarly the Blackwoods and the Statesmen purchased the James D. Vaughn Music Company in 1964. The publishing end of the companies declined rapidly after the purchase and rights to the Vaughn company were sold subsequently to the Church of God. Similarly, Zondervan, a religious publishing company in Michigan, purchased the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company and eventually moved the operation to Michigan. Today, the seven shape note tradition of gospel singing has become an isolated niche inside the greater market of gospel music. While a national convention for gospel quartets attracts thousands of devotees and participants from across the United States during the course of a week, the National Singing Convention draws less than a thousand for a weekend meeting somewhere in the South. The trend parallels musical expression in modern America. Music has evolved from a communal folk activity in which many participated into a genre that supports individual musical specialists who reach mass audiences through technological means such as radio and recordings. Convention gospel music and community singings still occur in Mineral Wells, Brownfield, Seymour, Stephenville, and dozens of other small Texas towns. Participants travel a couple hundred miles or more in a weekend to attend such gatherings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Precious Memories of Virgil O. Stamps* (Dallas: Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company, 1941). David H. Stanley, "The Gospel Singing Convention in South Georgia," *Journal of American Folklore* 95 (January-March 1982).

Richard J. Mason

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(NOTE: "s.v." stands for sub verbo, "under the word.")

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